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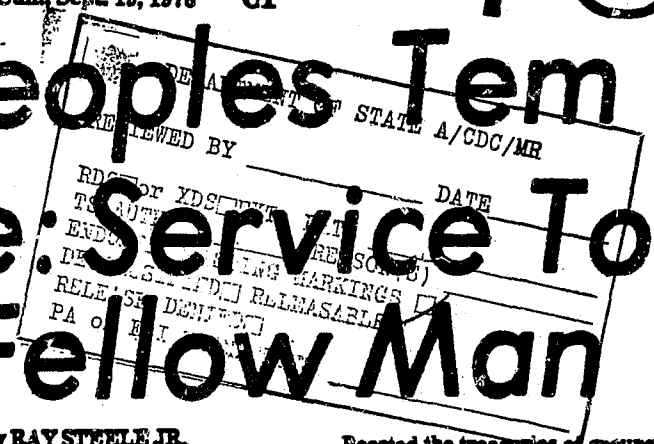
Peoples Temple: Service To Fellow Man



By RAY STEELE JR.
Bee Staff Writer

PEOPLES TEMPLE is many things to many people.

Its demonstrations last week on behalf of four jailed Fresno Bee newsmen is emblematic of its active role in society.

The church, based in the Bay Area, provides housing and care for the elderly and orphans and dormitories for college students.

It operates a farm mission in South America to produce food for the underprivileged while teaching the nationals self-sufficiency and attempting to dispel a bad image of the United States.

It has a fleet of Greyhound-type buses for transporting its 9,000 members throughout the state to church meetings and rallies.

It offers free legal services and health care.

It has a boat sailing off the South American coast which provides medical and agricultural assistance to those countries.

Each year it channels thousands of dollars into so many philanthropic organizations that its list of beneficiaries rivals a United Way directory.

Let the Peoples Temple hear of a need and the congregation jumps in to help.

IN THE LAST YEAR, the congregation's donations have:

— Helped keep open a medical clinic in San Francisco which otherwise would have closed.

— Benefited research in the medical fields of cancer, heart disease and sickle-cell anemia.

— Suported educational broadcasting such as KQED.

— Provided emergency cash to distressed families, particularly those of slain law enforcement officers.

— Boosted the treasuries of groups fighting hunger, building schools, developing hospitals, opening church programs or working with Indians.

— Aided civil rights causes, both financially and through demonstrations, including those involving discrimination and the jailing of The Bee newsmen and Los Angeles Times reporter William Farr.

Peoples Temple Christian Church, as it is properly called, is affiliated with the 2-million member, nationwide Disciples of Christ.

THE MAN BEHIND the many-faceted church is the Rev. Jim Jones, 44, a pastor and missionary for 25 years, and formerly a teacher and businessman.

Jones' theology is succinct: "The highest worship to God is service to your fellow man."

Members of the church interviewed

'I visualize God as love. You can reverse that, too, and say love is God.'

Jones admits he doesn't adhere to fundamentalist teachings of the Bible, but is driven by his oft-repeated phrase of serving fellow man.

He does it with a budget of $400,000 — "We try to be frugal," he says — and a congregation that is willing to leave home or job to get involved.

"I visualize God as love," he said in an interview. "You can reverse that, too, and say love is God. I try to manifest the highest degree of love and compassion that I can with my finite being.

"Jesus, in Matthew, put the pressure on the church by emphasizing it's what you do for others that counts. That's what we try to do, to serve others."

A NATIVE OF Indiana where he was graduated from the University of Indiana and a Bible college, Jones began preaching soon after he got out of school. He also worked part-time as a school teacher to supplement his income.

After serving several pastorates there, he came to California 11 years ago, settling in the small Mendocino County community of Redwood Valley, eight miles north of Ukiah.

"We considered California more progressive," said Jones of the family's decision to come West. "Having adopted a black child, we thought it created a lot of pressures. We heard there were a number of ethnic groups scattered in Redwood Valley and it would give us an opportunity to grow up on a small farm."

Jones noted that of his nine children, eight are adopted and most are of mixed ancestries including Korean, Indian, Mexican and Japanese.

HIS CHURCH is as diverse as his family, and has been described by one religious writer as the most multiracial congregations ever seen. Jones said about 35 per cent are Caucasians, 45 per cent black, 10 per cent Chicano and 10 per cent Indian and Asian.

"We go out of our way to break down all barriers between socio-economic and ethnic classes," said Jones. "We find a very wholesome unison between all these people.

"We think there is something important in the Kerner Commission Report which said we are heading toward two societies, separate but unequal, one black, one white. One of the sharpest messages of the Scriptures is that God doesn't see a difference in people.

"One of the challenges of this church is that there are no barriers between young and old. The typical thing you see in a church is a gap between age. You don't see that in our church. Neither do you see a gap between race or creed."

In the same vein, the church is open to all beliefs. Tere are both fundamentalists — "not too many," said Jones — and agnostics. "We even have people who come here just because they like to help people and care about serving people. They feel they are equals. We don't claim to be a highly evolved people."

THE BASIC TENET, Jones said, is that members should subscribe to the practical teachings of Jesus Christ.

"We don't attempt to define the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell," said Jones. "I'm not futuristic. That's one of the dangers. Jesus said we should build the kingdom of heaven on earth. Well, when we were marching, some said it was the Lord's will for those men to be in jail. I think that is a dangerous escapism."

Jones began his California ministry in the garage of his Redwood Valley home. Some members of his Indiana congregations followed him west and the church grew.

He opened a branch church in the Fillmore district of San Francisco seven years ago. It now serves as his headquarters. Another branch was opened in Los Angeles four years ago.

THERE ARE MEMBERS throughout the state who are transported to services on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at one of the three churches by its fleet of buses. Jones or one of 12 associate ministers conducts the services, with Jones alternating weekends n Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

'Being that we are activists, we also want it known that we are opposed to violence.'

The San Francisco church is in what Jones calls a "transitional area," a kind way of saying a number of the buildings are deteriorating.

It is a church without permanent pews so that the facility can be transformed into a community center.

From there, area residents are offered free medical care provided by volunteer nurses and doctors, and free legal services provided by volunteer attorneys.

Additionally, there are griatric facilities for the elderly, a drug rehabilitation program which Jones says has helped more than 125 persons kick the habit and a food commisary.

HOWEVER, UNLIKE rescue missions, Jones said Leoples Temple does not require any kind of religious indoctrination of hungry persons before giving them food.

Besides its own social programs, Peoples Temple has funneled thousands of dollars into other causes such as the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, Big Brothers of America, an Indian relief program and a plan to combat hunger.

When a law enforcement officer is critically shot or slain, the church usually steps into help with money, said Jones. The church gave the family of a slain Highway Patrolman in Los Banos $500.

"Being that we are activists, we also want it known that we are opposed to violance," said Jones. "Whenever an officer is slain, we make a donation to the family. The typical image of the person who protests for peoples' rights it that they are militant. We are pacifists."

JONES SAID THE bulk of the church's protest is limited to letter writing. However, about 1,000 members of the church, wearing paper "Free The Bee Four" buttons on their lapels, participated in last week's opening of the Democratic headquarters in San Francisco.

One of those attending was Rosalyn Carter, wife of Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, who asked Jones to dine with her.

"I can tell you this," said Jones, "I told her all about The Bee Four."

Jones said the money for all the church's activities comes from members "and others just wanting to help."

"We have no demand on tithing," said Jones. "When the congregation sees things happening, they tend to respond. Some casses just stir people so that they put on rummage sales or bake sales. That helps raise money."

JONES ALSO SAID the church is "very frugal," and cited the use of the San Francisco church "sanctuary" as a multipurpose facility as an example.

Jones said the motivating force for many involved in Peoples Temple is the work or the cause.

"We are interested in your newsmen, for example, because freedom should be a concern for everyone," said JOnes. "We have demonstrated since the Civil Rights marches years back. But we saw that the only people showing concern were the newsmen, so we decided to get involved."